

What was here in the pueblo? A few hundred families; none he had yet seen—even Tilman—looked as prosperous as St. Louis’s grandest. Low, squat houses that seemed to blend in with the dirt around them, flat roofs reinforced with tar that left ugly dark streaks on the walls. Too few horses, sheep and goats to counter an unnerving quiet. Even his mother, little as she had, cultivated a small garden of roses, hollyhocks and violets. Here were no flowers, no butterflies. Flies, though, and lots of them, alighting from horseshit piles on the road.

But he had to admit, the light was warm, even comforting, casting the mountain’s long shadows onto the plain as day slid into evening. And most important, two thousand miles lay between him and his father.

He soon came to the river, barely remembering his crossing only two evenings before, more dead than alive. This time he noted its width and depth. A respectable river had he encountered it in the mountains. Nothing like the Mississippi, of course, a mile wide, a hundred feet deep he’d heard said, and a twelve-day trip to its mouth at New Orleans even by the fastest steamboat. Scott had no idea how long this river was but felt sure its commercial possibilities were limited. After all, what lay at either end but wildness?

To his unfamiliar eyes, this river looked puny, its flow unreliable. From where he stood, orchards and vineyards at his back, he saw that small islands dotted a shallow river bed. Tall reeds and willows grew on the islands, a variety of birds grazed the river, ducks bobbed their heads into the water where the stream was deep enough to pluck out a fish. There *were* areas that looked to have some depth, but these alternated with others that nursed a trickle of water, barely enough to cover pebbles the size of those beneath his feet as well as rocks the size of boulders.

Used to living alongside a river that accommodated a huge volume of water in all seasons, he didn’t know that at this time of year the river was as dry as it was likely to get. October was nearly upon them and, with it, the season of rains would begin. The placid stream in front of him could become a raging torrent in a few hours. He was unaware of storms that changed the course of this river every year, sometimes redirecting it only a few feet east or west, other storms so violent the river changed course entirely, entering the Pacific Ocean not at a harbor in San Pedro Bay directly south of the pueblo, as it did now, but towards the west.

He didn't know that the San Gabriel River flowed out of the mountains east of the pueblo and, for now, emptied into the Río Porciúncula. He was ignorant about the importance of these rivers and all their tributaries and side streams: they watered the vast plain he had crossed to get here; brought water to the pueblo and to the ranchos he hadn't yet seen; irrigated orchards and fields in the few places where the land was cultivated; nourished the cattle whose numbers grew daily; and had, in fact, nurtured a thousand generations of Indians before Scott and his kind were ever seen on the land. He wanted to scoff at those who called this anemic stream a river when they had never seen the likes of the Mississippi. Instead, he looked into the river, noticed how clear the water ran—unlike the mud sludged Mississippi—and found the questions he hadn't known enough to ask.

What was here for him in the pueblo? Refuge, of course, but what else?

He turned his back on the river, surveyed the handful of houses and a cluster of field workers headed off to whatever they knew as home, heard a lone donkey bray, all under the mountains' protective cloak of twilight.

What was here for him?

Infinite space, yes.

Infinite opportunity, too?

Scott kicked the dirt with the toe of his boot.